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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/02/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI INTELLECTUALS CALL FOR FAST IN SUPPORT OF
DETAINEES

REF: A. RIYADH 1022
[1](#)B. RIYADH 959
[1](#)C. SECSTATE 64901
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[1](#)E. 07 RIYADH 497

Classified By: CDA David Rundell for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[11.](#) (C) SUMMARY: A group of thirteen Saudi intellectuals has called a November 8-9 fast to protest the detentions of eleven individuals they claim are being held for their political beliefs. Word of the protest has spread via the Internet, with like-minded Saudis invited to join. The intellectuals, self-proclaimed human rights activists and reformers, hope to draw attention to their greater cause of political reform. The fast begins the same day as King Abdullah arrives in the U.S. to lead the Interfaith Dialogue meeting in New York. END SUMMARY

THE CAST: ACTIVISTS AND DETAINEES

[12.](#) (S/NF) On October 24, the website www.humriht-civsocsa.org published a call "to show solidarity with detainees and support their human rights." The thirteen organizers published their names, some with cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses, in an attempt to attract sympathizers. Three organizers met with PolOff in a Riyadh hotel on October [129](#). The meeting followed the television program hosted by one of the activists, Dr. Mohammad al-Qahtani (strictly protect), who works as an Economics Professor with the Institute of Diplomatic Studies. Joining him were Fowzan Mohsen al-Harbi (strictly protect), an engineer, and Fahd Abdulaziz al-Oraini (strictly protect), a school principal. Dr. al-Qahtani declares that the group of intellectuals is "not an underground society," and that they meet weekly to discuss human rights and civil society. They admit that they have greater ability to organize and criticize the government than in the past. They cite two reasons for this: (1) the Saudi public has greater access to the international media, and (2) the King states that he is a reformer, and therefore must allow some reform activity.

[13.](#) (S/NF) The website call-to-action lists eleven detainees. Topping the list is Dr. Matrouk al-Faleh, a university professor and well-known reformer who is currently jailed in Buraydah on charges of inciting women's protests. Nine individuals arrested in Western Province on February 2, 2007 also appear on the list. The SAG stated at the time that

this group was arrested on charges related to terror finance.

At least two of the nine indeed have questionable ties (Reftel E). Several are also known reformers who in the past have signed petitions calling for a constitutional monarchy, but these two activities are not mutually exclusive.

THE FAST: WHY AND HOW

¶4. (S/NF) The forty-eight hour fast will take place November 8-9, which is a Saudi weekend. The original list contained thirteen names. An additional 26 have been added on the website, for a total of 39. The activists note that others have contacted them to support the cause, but do not want their names listed. Dr. al-Qahtani states that this method of protest is preferable to other avenues. He said it does not lead to arrests and is "more civilized." Dr. al-Qahtani called the fast "the first step," though no following step has been decided. The activists state that they will participate from their respective homes, not a central location, and will abstain from food and water for the weekend's duration.

WHAT THE ACTIVISTS REALLY WANT

¶5. (C) Nominally, the activists want the government to try or release the eleven detainees. Their protest draws public attention to the issue. In the meeting with PolOff, however, they focused more energy on the subject of political reform. They describe themselves as "concerned and outraged with the status quo." Their chief complaints include a lack of

accountability for government officials, insufficient power of the Shoura Council, and a lack of public participation in government. The activists cited family and patriotism as their motivations. They take pride in their tribal affiliations and long ties to the Saudi state. Two of the members independently cited their children, adding the comment: "We are paying the price for our grandparents' negligence." He believes their grandparents "lived with the (al-Saud) regime because they knew no better. Today, we know."

TECHNOLOGY: KEEPING ONE STEP AHEAD

¶6. (S/NF) The intellectuals use technology to link-up with peers across the country - and globally. They use Facebook, Skype, Paltalk and Google groups to discuss tactics and arrange meetings. This provides a new freedom for virtual activism, making it difficult for the SAG to keep tabs on them. As of November 2, the group's Facebook group had 161 members from various countries. The server carrying the website is located in the United States - thus out of the reach of local censors. The group avoids cell phones, which they assume are monitored and could be used as evidence against them. They claim that the phone calls of an arrested person can lead to the arrest of anyone listed among that individual's "dialed numbers."

COMMENT

¶7. (C) The organizers of the fast appear to be looking for a new and perhaps safer way to draw attention to their cause of political reform. The activists use the term "hunger strike," which infers that they will not eat until their demands are met. However, this protest is actually a fast of fixed duration. To our knowledge a fast has not been used in this way as a form of protest in the kingdom, so this event pushes the envelope of what authorities might tolerate. By remaining at home, however, the activists reduce the risk of becoming detainees themselves; a risk which would presumably

be much higher if they conducted their protest in a public place. In this they are aided by their ability to use the Internet to organize and publicize the event, which would not have been possible a few years ago. Given the novelty of this form of protest, it will be interesting to observe its impact and the authorities' response. The event could have little public impact, especially if the SAG chooses to take no action against it, which we expect. Official indifference, however, could embolden the intellectuals to expand their activities. On the other hand, SAG action to arrest the dissenters would demonstrate that even a 'virtual' protest goes too far at this point.

¶18. (C) The story has been picked up by the U.S. and international media. This could be inconvenient for King Abdullah, who arrives in the U.S. on November 8, the same day the protest begins, to participate in the November 12-13 UN General Assembly session on interfaith dialogue. The King's visit to New York is a crowning moment for his Interfaith Dialogue Initiative, which is an attempt to show Saudi Arabia's tolerant side.

¶19. (S/NF) With the exception of al-Faleh, it's unclear what ties, if any, the activists have to the detainees. The protest is unlikely to spur the release of any prisoners, at least two of whom are held for apparently bona fide reasons. Others could also be guilty, or only guilty by association, but this remains unconfirmed. However, the general public is unlikely to know the details of the accusations against the detainees, which makes it easier for the protest's organizers to paint all eleven as prisoners of conscience. END COMMENT

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